

Research of the transmission of and issues regarding Buddhism in America

An Honors College Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey M. Brackett", written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

“We are now witnessing only the immediate aftermath of the first, large-scale fluorescence of Buddhism in America. The rapid turning of the wheel of the dharma in the last three decades churned up great clouds of New World dust, much of which still remains suspended in the air. And historical precedents in Asia suggest that there is a great deal more yet to come.” (Williams and Queen, 1999, p. xxxiv.) – Richard Hughes Seager

In recent decades, Theravada Buddhist traditions have transferred west from Southeast Asia through multiple methods and techniques. Immigrants traveled west in search of work and ‘freedom,’ Peace Corps volunteers brought back philosophies learned while overseas, and Buddhist monks and missionaries have carried their message out from the East. However, upon arrival in the U.S., Theravada Buddhists have been required to adapt their practices and traditions in vast way in order to better ‘fit’ into American culture and society. The many forms of Buddhism now in America reflect its inherent ability to adapt to modernity and to reach Westerners on a simpler level than by attempting to use the complicated and deeply-rooted traditions associated with Southeast Asian Theravada. One challenge is to synthesize numerous forms of Buddhism that are present in American into a single, united ‘American Buddhism.’ There are, however, many factors to consider, including societal condition, current religious traditions, resources for and goals of practitioners, and practitioners’ links to the country from which their tradition originated. The coming decades will illustrate Buddhism’s adaptive and collaborative capabilities as it works toward a united form of Western, or American Buddhism.

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Forward

This research has been an excellent complement to my undergraduate work at Ball State University in the Religious Studies and Social Work departments. It has allowed me to delve deeper into the specific aspects of Buddhism's Western transmission and the issues Buddhism is continuing to face that are so interesting to me. I spent the majority of my research studying the works of well-known authors, researchers, and scholars of religion, melding my findings into a cohesive work. The hardest challenge in this work was to determine which information to use and which aspects to focus most of my study on. Obviously, as indicated in the text, due to the vast variety of Buddhist philosophy, there are many more issues that could have been addressed and analyzed. I chose, rather, to focus on several specific issues and how they relate to the overall Buddhist scene in America. I look forward to continuing this research in the future as I track the progress Buddhism continues to make in America. As Buddhism writes history, on-lookers are sure to be enlightened, entertained, and mystified by its adaptive qualities and hopeful perseverance.

Transmission

Few forces in the world are as wide-spread and dynamic as religion. Religion aides people in overcoming life's struggles, motivates people to engage in 'holy wars,' and bonds people together across land and sea. It is this same force that compels people to devote their lives to research, study, and practice religions in order to gain some sort of clarity regarding reality and the nature of the world and life. Religions new to certain geographic regions test the boundaries and hospitality of traditional religions and conventional philosophies. The recent transmission of Buddhism from the East into America has greatly influenced many aspects of America's culture as well as shaping religion as a whole in an evolving and developing society.

Although Buddhism has been in America for more than a century, it has, for the most part, been surrounded by an environment of toleration through times of confirmation coupled with times of deep skepticism (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xv). Only in the past three decades has the media "discovered" Buddhism, treating it as trendy and exotic: focusing primarily on high-profile figures such as the Dalai Lama, prominent Buddhist leaders, as well as the life stories of actors, actresses, and artists (Prebish & Baumann, 2002, p. 1). The media has failed to portray accurately the many facets and diversity of Buddhism to America. Consequently, Americans have only seen Buddhism through a distorted lens, one that causes many people to wonder how a religion that does not teach any notion of an immortal soul or a god could possibly attract so many people.

According to Layman (1976), Americans have formulated stereotypes that the "image of Buddhism does not include temples located in converted warehouses, nor does it include Sunday School rooms, wall-to-wall carpeting, hymns sung in English and coffee after church. Yet all of this is a part of modern Buddhism, which in the United States has adapted itself to Western

architecture and to the American way of life” (p. xiii). Since Buddhism is still new to the West, it is still subject to presupposed and often irrational stereotypes. Many Westerners still think that Buddhists are monks with shaved heads, wearing exotic robes and continually meditating. The common practice of Kung Fu is an aspect of Buddhism, but not all Buddhists know and practice Kung Fu (Coleman, 2001, p. 4). These and other stereotypes add to the confusion of trying to convey accurately the essentials of Buddhism while transmitting it from East to West.

Americans can see the visual appearances of Buddhism in the arts as, well as the ever-increasing number of converts and Buddhist institutions. Buddhism can be seen as the “religion of reason,” which some uphold as the best example of what human intelligence can achieve, independent from faith and divine grace (Chryssides, 1999, p. 204). When this religion spreads rapidly, issues of identity, nationality, and spirituality arise. The following text presents research that shows the transition of Buddhism into America, the effects this new religion has had on a formerly “Christian Country,” the reasons people are drawn to Buddhist philosophy, and the outlook for Buddhism’s future in America.

Ideas, objects, and practices have historically traveled with people along trade and shipping routes across local, national and international geographic boundaries. Generally, scholars of religion agree that for thousands of years religions have moved in this same fashion, with merchants, politicians and missionaries on trade, economic and political routes (Cadge, 2005, p. 8). In accordance with these observations, the earliest beginnings likely can be traced back to Chinese immigrants who first appeared on the West coast in the 1840’s (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 3). However, immigrants brought their culture, heritage, and religion to the land of opportunity with a vague feeling of optimism.

Theravada Buddhism specifically has been introduced to America in two main ways since 1965. The largest groups, initially, to infuse this form of Buddhism into American culture were the immigrants from Thailand and Sri Lanka for primarily economic reasons and Laos, Burma, and Cambodia to both escape native political uncertainty and oppressive governments as refugees (Cadge, 2005, pp. 11 & 14; Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 7). The other groups can be seen more generally in the “West,” which denotes “non-Asian industrialized nation states where Buddhist teachings, practices, and ideas have become established” and where responsible research and resources are available: Canada, the United States of America, Brazil, various states of Europe, Israel, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand (though other countries are beginning to produce brief yet insufficient data) (Prebish & Baumann, 2002, p. 4). This second group includes Euro-Americans that embraced Buddhism as first generation converts out of an “intellectual attraction and interest in spiritual practice” (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 7). These American converts began to practice after individuals such as Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein (American Peace Corps volunteers), along with several others, brought forms of Theravada Buddhism back to the United States and began to teach (Cadge, 2005, p. 11). Their form and method revolutionized the Buddhist scene in America and set the stage for all subsequent traditions.

Several items are very intriguing about Buddhism’s arrival on the American scene. First of all, Buddhism’s acculturation to America seems to have occurred much faster than in other countries such as Japan, which took almost 500 years (Prebish & Baumann, 2002, p. 3). Second, the Buddhist tradition in each of the previously mentioned countries and the rest of Asia are, up until this time, distinct entities. Now, all of these forms of Buddhism, with their diverse

traditions, rituals, and doctrines are meeting for the first time as neighbors in the West (p. 3).

This encounter is now producing so many sects that it is hard to keep an accurate count.

With all these traditions coming to America, I choose to focus my study on Theravada Buddhism, one of the three main vehicles of Buddhism world-wide. The origin of Theravada Buddhism in America can be traced to a speech by Don David Hewavitharne (Anagarika Dharmapala) at the first World Parliament of Religions meeting in 1893 and now, within 100 years, most facets of Buddhism are permeating the American society (Cadge, 2005, p. 24; Prebish & Baumann, 2002, p. 88). There are four main reasons why the World Parliament of Religions was a significant event for understanding American Buddhist history. First, Asian Buddhists presented several of the most prominent sects to Americans who began to see Buddhism as a mass of highly diverse traditions instead of a single, monolithic entity (Seager, 2001, p. 36). Second, the Parliament marked a point when Buddhism was beginning to be understood in the context of modernity, as a fully up-to-date living tradition. Americans were taught that Buddhism really could be applicable to the current day and is not merely an ancient, foreign religion. Third, the Parliament is seen as the beginning of an interconnected movement of modern religions. At this time, a number of organizations originated to raise awareness and understanding of the world's religions. And finally, the World Parliament of Religions marked the beginning of Buddhist missions to the United States, to spread the Dhamma to the West (Seager, 2001, p. 37). Other than these efforts of Theravada missionaries, practitioners from other countries and traditions have been proselytizing America since the turn of the 19th century. For this same reason, Burmese and Sri Lankan monks visited Washington D.C in 1966 before the first Theravada Buddhist organization was even formed. With the founding of the Washington Buddhist Vihara, Sri Lankan and Thai lay people and monastics were also

organizing temples in California by the early 1970's (Cadge, 2005, p. 26). It is particularly interesting that the teachings and practices of Buddhism were able to so easily find form and establish new homes in foreign lands.

Basic Buddhism

“The marrow of Buddhism is the actual experience of the awakened state, but the words that describe it can at least give us some clues if we don't confuse the description of the food for the actual meal.” (Coleman, 2001, p. 5)

Before further proceeding in this study, it is necessary to provide an overview of Buddhism's beginning, the Asian forms of Theravada Buddhism, and the corresponding doctrines and beliefs. The tradition of Buddhism is based on the life, teachings, and path of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, who was heir to his father's throne of the Shakya clan but instead chose to search for a way to end human suffering (de Bary, 1969, pp. 57-58). When Siddhartha was in his late twenties, he went on four different excursions from his palace when he came across an old man, a man inflicted with disease, a man's corpse, and men working in a field (de Bary, 1969, pp. 60-64). After these experiences, he knew he must find their underlying meaning so he left the palace to study and practice harsh ascetic disciplines, following Hindu teachings of the time. After about six years, he sat under a Bodhi tree for seven days and nights straight without blinking, meditating on the phenomena of suffering and eventually perceived the nature of the evils of this world: disease, old age, and death (Seager, 1999, p. 13). He found that 'attachment' makes these three things so horrible, and that the only way to overcome the inevitable suffering linked to one's 'attachment' is to renounce all that one is attached to, a view that has commonly stereotyped the Buddha as a pessimist. Moreover, he viewed the solution, or cessation, as being possible to achieve through the cultivation and

integration of meditation, ethical behavior and wisdom. He also was able to perceive the interrelatedness and interdependency of all things, that is, that no being has ever been independent nor has it ever had an unchanging essence of its own (Coleman, 2001, p. 5). After he had realized these things, he arose as the Buddha, the “Enlightened One.” He then preached to Hindu monks and anyone else that would listen that the only way to reach the same enlightenment he found was to follow a Middle Path which consisted of neither over-indulging nor being an ascetic (de Bary, 1969, p. 69). Although many of the teachings in Buddhism cannot be traced directly back to the Buddha himself, they have great symbolic meaning to the overarching Buddhist community as they are based on his character and his exhortations. The Buddha himself was not a Buddhist; he merely taught another path during the time of emerging ‘Hindu’ teachings, much like Martin Luther’s goal of reforming the Catholic Church. It is also interesting that the Buddha did not claim to be a deity, yet he has become an object of popular worship in many forms of Buddhism. Also, one of the biggest cases against Buddhism being a “true or legitimate religion” is that it does not focus any attention on God or gods which is the typical common denominator of religious life (Coleman, 2001, p. 4). Even today, with the numerous sects and increasingly liberal approaches to religion, all Buddhist sects are grounded in the history of Gautama even though they may have drastically differing philosophies.

There are three “vehicles,” or main divisions, of Buddhism throughout the world:

Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, as well as the numerous sects of each vehicle that have developed over time. First, Theravada, the “Way of the Elders,” or *Hinayana*, the “Little Vehicle,” is the traditional and orthodox form of early Buddhism. Theravada is based on the Pali canon and is dominant primarily in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos. Theravada is also one of the major forms of Buddhism in America in the Asian American immigrant

communities (Seager, 2001, pp. 22-23). Second, Mahayana, the “Great Vehicle,” began around 100 C.E. with distinct emphases on the interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings. Though Mahayana began in India, it later drew from Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and other indigenous traditions, adding new scriptures over time. Today, the Mahayana tradition is widely practiced in China, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Korea, and Vietnam, as well as in the United States (Seager, 2001, pp. 23-29; Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, p. 3). Third, Vajrayana, which frequently is viewed as an extension of Mahayana, its own separate vehicle, or sometimes classified as Tantric Buddhism, is based on *tantras* (specific texts) and is most thoroughly developed in Tibet. Tantric Buddhism (Vajrayana) has many distinct and unique methods and rituals (Seager, 2001, pp. 29-30). For my research, as previously noted, I focused largely on Theravada Buddhism and how it developed in the East and has, in the past three decades, transferred to Western countries, concentrating mainly on its makeup in the United States.

The most fundamental of the Buddha’s teachings is known as the Four Noble Truths, which conveys both his conclusions regarding the human condition and a cure for the human condition. These Four Noble Truths have become a standard for most practitioners in the American Buddhist community. The First Truth is that all life is characterized by *dukkha*, or ‘suffering’ (Seager, 2001, p. 15). Though everything in life is subject to *dukkha*, Buddhists view this as neither awful nor pessimistic but rather a realistic analysis of the fundamental human problem. The Second Truth is that *dukkha*, suffering, is caused by *tanha*, ‘craving’ (p. 15). This truth is based on the fact that, at the most basic level, people always want what they do not or cannot have and hold dear the things they fear they might lose which is fundamental in causing suffering. The Third Truth is that *dukkha* will cease when craving ceases. Through this cessation, suffering can be brought to an end and pure joy and liberation from the wheel of

samsara can be achieved. *Samsara* is commonly translated as the “endless wandering through round after round of death and rebirth,” on the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (p. 13). The Fourth and final Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path, which is a set of guidelines for how people should engage in action which will lead beyond *samsara* to nirvana, being unbound from the cycle of rebirth. This set of guidelines includes having right views, right determination, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (p. 16). This appears like a formula of good behaviors to reach liberation, but it is in fact the essence of the Buddha’s teachings and wisdom.

The majority of the Buddha’s teachings, or those attributed to the Buddha, were compiled along three main divisions, entitled the Tipitaka (“Three Baskets”), which comprehensively yet briefly accounts for the meaning of these teachings. The Tipitaka is comprised of the Vinaya, the detailed code for nuns and monks; the Sutras, or the public discourses that are attributed to the Buddha; and the Abhidharma, a set of deep psycho-philosophical teachings (Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, pp. 4-5). Lay Buddhists also can easily reference this book for guidance in their Buddhist practices since it clearly defines the majority of Buddhist philosophy due to its compilation by some of the world’s most intelligent and enlightened people (Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, p. 4). Not only can the Tipitaka be used for Theravada practice, but since it embodies the Buddha’s foundational teachings, it can be built upon by all future sects.

Introduction to Other Main Sects

Other than Theravada Buddhism, there is a vast array of Buddhist sects in Asia as well as those currently moving to America. According to Prebish & Tanaka (1998), “the faces of Buddhism in America are many. They are diverse, and enthusiastic, and active, and forward

looking in their optimism” (p. 10). According to Coleman, the notion that there is a common thread that runs through all Buddhism sects is a Western one (Coleman, 2001, p. 16). It is evident that Zen Buddhism has become quite popular in America, even though many people only use the qualities of the philosophy that best suit their lifestyle. Zen, however, is not the only form of Japanese Buddhism in America, especially since the Buddhist Mission of North America was established (changed to the “Buddhist Churches of America” in 1944) by two Japanese missionaries and has since become one of the most stable Buddhist communities in North America (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 5). Other than these, there are two major lineages of Zen Buddhism in America as it was split in Japan: the Rinzai tradition and the Soto tradition which, in turn, established the Chicago Buddhist Temple (p. 4). The Rinzai school of Japanese Zen is typically associated with an emphasis on the use of *koans*, fables or riddles used as a focal point for the mind during meditation to help drive the mind toward enlightenment, while the Soto school of Zen places primary emphasis on sitting meditation (Seager, 1999, pp. 281-282, 29). However, several Zen teachers and masters in America have chosen to teach both Rinzai and Soto to their students. Though the traditions have kept their distinctiveness in America, together they diversify the American practice of Zen.

Although Japanese Buddhist groups were much more noticeable and widespread in America than Chinese Buddhist groups during the 1960’s, rapid growth has been seen in the last half century. Large monastic groups such as the Sino-American Buddhist Association, by monk Hsuan-Hua in 1959, instituted a large monastery in Talmage, California known as the “City of Ten Thousand Buddhas,” now called the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 6). As of 1998, there were 125 Chinese Buddhist organizations in the United States alone, found in virtually every major metropolitan area across the country. According to

Prebish, in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, the various forms of Chinese Buddhism include the eclectic combination of Ch'an (the Chinese precursor to Zen), Vinaya, T'ien-t'ai, Tantra, and Pure Land practices (p. 6). The most recent groups to blend into Buddhist groups in America are the colorful Tibetan groups which possess a "rich tradition of art and powerful psychological approach to mental health" (p. 6). These other main sects have had a serious impact on the religious landscape of America. Of these groups, Theravada Buddhism and especially its practice of Vipassana have been the most recent to grace the American scene.

Between 1977 and 2000, over 500,000 immigrants came to the United States from these five countries (Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Laos) and the number of temples, as to be expected, immediately increased (Cadge, 2005, p. 20). According to Cadge (2005), the development of Theravada Buddhism in the United States is directly related to its history in the five aforementioned countries and how Buddhism was shaped there by Western Christian influences in the 19th and 20th centuries (p. 24). Buddhism progressed from its "original" form in those countries as new ideas and concepts were encountered, and even more so as the various sects have come to the United States and gone to other Western countries. At this point, many scholars of religion highlight Buddhism's flexibility and how it has been able to adapt to the many demands of lifestyles and cultures without sacrificing its overarching identity (Layman, 1976, p. xiv). It is the nature and essence of Buddhism to be able to travel through time and place, adapting itself along the way (Chryssides, 1999, p. 223). With this adaptability, it is no wonder Buddhism has so many sects within specific geographic regions.

It is also interesting to note that very few religions started in the United States. The history of religion in America is a "story about how religions, started in one place, are carried along global networks and constructed and reconstructed in new ways on American shores"

(Cadge, 2005, p. 9). These notions of flexibility and transmission are more easily grasped when we understand that Theravada Buddhism is not necessarily a coherent system but a “collection of teachings, institutions, people and practices gathered in various combinations by people who want to understand or practice the tradition” (Cadge, 2005, p. 11). Since arriving in United States, Buddhism has been continuously adapting, for better or for worse, to the diverse aspects of American society. Yet, despite or maybe in light of all of these transitions, people from all geographic regions, economic systems, classes and races are able to grasp Buddhist concepts and integrate them into their lives.

“American Buddhists”

At this juncture, I will explain further who these “American Buddhists” are and some reasons why they decide to forego their commonly observed religion for a “strange” Asian philosophy. Buddhism is drastically different from any other religion previously established in America, as it provides access to a “spiritual” realm without aid from any deity or other means. For Americans, Buddhism and its philosophy appear to be more likened to our notion of psychology rather than religion (Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, p. 2). It is also clear that the first American converts were surprisingly willing to relinquish the notion of a Creator God and an immortal soul, though they struggled with criticisms that Buddhism is “cosmologically negative and socially passive” (Coleman, 2001, p. 57). Nonetheless, many Americans have readily accepted the disparity represented by Buddhism and easily switched to adhering to a new world view.

According to Thomas Tweed in Prebish & Baumann (2002), Buddhists are any individuals who self-identify with Buddhists, “not-just-Buddhists,” lukewarm-Buddhists,

Dharma shoppers and night stand Buddhists (p. 7). Also, the Buddhism trend in America tends to especially attract individuals with Jewish backgrounds, many African Americans, those involved in the wellness movement, and a growing percentage of the highly literate (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 3). American religions have long been influenced by the movement of religious traditions on the global scale (Cadge, 2005, p. 9). It is, therefore, not as surprising that Americans could be just as easily persuaded by Buddhism as by any other religion. Buddhism, like many other religions, offers techniques to help people deal with loss and pacify their daily life and inevitable struggles. According to one Asian Buddhist, “being Buddhist means trying to be a better person...you can’t save the world but you do the best you can” (Cadge, 2005, p. 3). As we will see later, there are a myriad of reasons why Americans convert to Buddhism, but there is now a division between the two primary classifications of American Buddhism.

There indeed seems to be a divide of sorts between Asian immigrants and white converts in regard to their reasons for attending the temple and which facets of Buddhism they choose to observe. Immigrants tend to be motivated by a desire to attend devotional services and ceremonies, whereas white Americans are more likely to focus on the meditation sessions and sutra study classes (Cadge, 2005, p. 25). This divide contributes to the complexity of Buddhism in the American context. According to research done by Coleman on a certain group of convert Buddhists, 80% were unsatisfied with their family’s religion prior to conversion, 66% had traveled outside the United States, 69% were single or divorced, only 37% thought that marriage was important, 83% joined Soka Gakkai International (SGI) following an invitation from a friend or relative, and 60% still practice because of the “egalitarian social benefits” (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xxvi). Though these trends are prevalent, more converts (probably daily) are diversifying and the term “American Buddhism.” For many, converting to Buddhism is a clear

example of a supply and demand function: there is a vast supply of religions in America that constantly “pull” potential converts in new directions and a demand or need commonly held by people to have a new religious experience in the midst of dissatisfaction with one’s present identity coupled with a degree of “social and intellectual openness to change” (p. xxv). This function has caused many people to evaluate and modify their religious positions.

Perhaps Coleman’s results cannot hold much weight in this research, since his practitioners were deemed politically liberal and primarily came from Jewish and Catholic backgrounds, a highly disproportionate sample of American Buddhism as a whole. Here, the issue may be raised of leaving one religious tradition to follow a new, distinctly different philosophy. Tweed asserts that conversion should not be seen as a “binary process in which the old identity is switched off as the new one is activated,” but to consider the possibility of a harmonious duality among traditions that forms individual philosophies about religion (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xxiv). Indeed, many Americans, when presented with the philosophy of Buddhism, shirk their ties to their traditional religion in order to become Buddhist. The Western Buddhist Order can be seen as a radical development, an influence that is both provocatively and deliberately presenting an alternative to, for example, Christianity (Chryssides, 1999, p. 224). Many members of the rising Western Buddhist Order are deliberately and consciously turning their backs on the God of Christianity, while others claim the ability to synthesize multiple religious traditions to suit their own needs.

David W. Chappell of the Soka University, for one, has spoken out on his ability to be open about his religious identity in this pluralistic world. He was born, baptized, and raised a Christian and became an ordained United Church of Canada minister, but he questions whether beliefs are the best way to define a religious life or identity (Chappell, 2005, p. 9). For Chappell,

being religious should be a matter of practice as an effect of faith rather than beliefs. Because of these things and his exposure to other people's views, his own spiritual journey has been altered. He endorses the analogy of being both a Canadian and an American to prove his theory that he can and does indeed proclaim a dual religious identity as a Christian and as a Buddhist (p. 11). In synthesizing these beliefs in his own mind, Chappell feels as though his studies of Buddhism have "transformed and enriched" his Christian understanding of Jesus, who he now regards as a bodhisattva, and of God (p. 11). For many reasons, Christianity has not been sufficient for Chappell through the years as he has encountered various struggles and hence was not satisfied by the answers and direction Christianity provided. His ability to fuse the two is based primarily on the parallels of "Christian love and Buddhist compassion, as well as the Christian belief that all are children of God and the Buddhist belief in the interrelatedness of all" things (p. 13). He admits though that classical Buddhist logic would not affirm that he is a Buddhist, and likewise for Christianity, but he stands firm stating that what is most important is whether one is Christ-like and enlightened (p. 14). When the study of religion is focused on people and includes interfaith dialogue, which will later be discussed, Chappell concludes that it is then that this blending of traditions will be acceptable and more readily wide-spread.

In a similar yet clearly distinct article, Rita M. Gross explains her own religious identity as either a religious Buddhist or Christian though being open to the legitimacy of the beliefs held by the other tradition. For Gross, regarding dual religious identities, no problem exists because "religions are language systems, and no language is universal and absolute;" therefore, she opens the door for the validity of more than one "language" because there may or may not be a "formless absolute that grounds all finite existence" (Gross, 2005, p. 15). In her article, she suspends her personal beliefs in order to deliver a fair, scholarly assessment of religious

absolutes in this age. She concludes that the only rational and humane conclusion that can be drawn is that “all religious institutions and creedal systems are human constructions dependent at least in part, if not wholly dependent, on the particular circumstances of those who construct and utter them,” compartmentalizing all due to limited rather than universal relevance (p. 16). Therefore, there is no reason to debate which is true and which is not because all are true in their own way. She also points out the pluralist’s point of view which does not seek to cater to religious absolutists for they claim that, “multiple religious symbols can coexist without needing to be ranked, that it is impossible that one religious symbol system is unequivocally superior to the others” (p. 18). In short, in the pluralist view, as well as Gross’, anything goes, including any sort or ratio of religious amalgamation possible. Her goal is to spread this view and continue to argue the virtues of the pluralist position because the alternative, she says, is falling to the negatives of the exclusivist position (p. 20). Both Chappell’s and Gross’ statements need to be remembered as discussions of religious dualism arise and are carried out.

With all the picking and choosing that is currently happening on the American Buddhism scene, it appears impossible to draw a line between essential and inessential Buddhist philosophy, on the one hand, and aspects of personal interest on the other. There are significantly differing views of this divide, from the freethinker who picks and chooses among all Theravada Buddhist influences to the conventionalist who adamantly defends the original Asian doctrines, rituals and ceremonies. People such as Ajahn Amaro, a British monastic who helped start the Abhayagiri Monastery in California, and Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, a Sri Lankan monk who currently leads the Bhavana Society in the Shenandoah Valley of West Virginia, argue that the monastic form is very important and, “if you do not preserve the form of Theravada Buddhism, the original form, eventually people won’t even know what it is” (Cadge,

2005, pp. 41 & 37). This problem, as it is depicted here, can now be seen in America in the various sects and ever-evolving sects with adherents who more or less choose how they want to be Buddhist. If Buddhism is simply a way of life, then it stands to reason that people can determine how devoted they want to be to “ancient” Buddhism.

Yet, this view of Buddhism leads to qualifying anyone as Buddhist if they do some sort of Buddhist ritual such as controlled breathing, meditation, and being kind and compassionate. Surely there is much more to being “Buddhist.” Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a white American-born monk, trained and ordained in Thailand, cautions that Dharma in the United States is becoming like the game of telephone, “things get[ting] passed from one generation to the next until they are garbled beyond recognition” (Cadge, 2005, p. 40). Luke Matthews, the current manager of the Dhamma Dhara Vipassana Meditation center, professes that the conservative approach has worked for centuries and should not have to be adapted just to preserve the American culture, as if it could be so sheltered; “I would say let’s adapt the culture and keep this as we had it” (p. 36). Unfortunately for these devotees, the Western diffusion of Buddhism seems to generally lack the “magical” and “spiritual” practices of the East and also tends to be a more subtle commitment. In fact, most non-immigrant Western Buddhists have engaged in Buddhism as it is scientific, rational, and grounded in reason and individual experience (Prebish & Baumann, 2002, p. 3). These statements seem to indicate an individualistic aspect of Buddhism instead of the more traditional view of inter-connectedness. Al Rapaport (1998) asserts that “history shows us that Buddhism inevitably exerts a strong influence in the cultures into which it is introduced. It’s up to those of us who practice today to determine where we go from here” (p. xv). There seems to be, therefore, no consensus regarding what is entailed in labeling oneself “Buddhist.”

The question remains then: how much can really be trimmed away or altered before the point of Buddhism is missed? There are so many religious options in the West, one may wonder how people select what to believe and follow. “Which fork in the road do you take when both signposts seem to point in the right direction?” states Goldstein (2002, p. 3). From the preceding research, it may seem doubtful that there could ever to be one single form of “American Buddhism.” Buddhism is on course to succumb to the same divisive and individualistic fate as Christianity in America, unless time discards some sects so that only the most popular remain that can be consolidated.

Indeed, the ease of travel and communication in this new century has brought increased availability and access to teachings and resources. Since Buddhist philosophy within Western boundaries implies new demographics, practices, and attitudes, Coleman concludes that perhaps a new, Fourth Vehicle of Buddhism is preparing to emerge as the Narayana or Lokayana (“world vehicle”) Buddhism (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xxiv). This new form of Western Buddhism would be an eclectic integration of the once-isolated Asian traditions as more and more people turn to the wisdom of the East in search of “practical and tested methods of spiritual inquiry” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 2). Christmas Humphreys concurs that there might indeed be a new form of Buddhism emerging that is particularly appropriate to the West. He states, “Why should there not be in time a Western Buddhism...a ‘new vehicle’” (Chryssides, 1999, p. 223). Some researchers hypothesize that there is an even narrower and truly American form of Buddhism emerging that will transcend the separation between the Asian American Buddhist immigrants and Euro-American Buddhist converts (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xvi). This notion of “one American Buddhism” is also reflected and enforced by the Buddhist Council of the Midwest that has potential to be made up of infinitely varied members (p. xxvii). A closer look at the main

distinctions among current Buddhist groups will better illuminate the possibility of a united American Buddhism in the future.

Three main distinctions can be made between the Buddhist groups currently in America. According to Seager (2001), the first tier of Theravada Buddhism in America is the immigrant communities who have settled primarily in California, Texas, New York, and Illinois and who have had to adjust to new social, economic and emotional complexities involved in Americanization. About 40 percent immigrated as refugees fleeing from war and revolution in Southeast Asia (Seager, 2001, p. 139). It is very difficult for these immigrants to adapt their monastic community to American customs, standards, and society while attempting to maintain the unique characteristics of their national traditions. The second layer opposes the previous one regarding the spectrum of Buddhist practice. This more open-minded layer includes converts to Buddhism in the Insight, or *vipassana*, meditation movement. This kind of Theravada Buddhism is typically shaped by the influence of “western secular humanism and psychotherapy” (Seager, 2001, p.137). This group is commonly composed of Buddhists who studied in Burma and returned to the United States in the 1960’s to become teachers. Their aim is to adapt the dharma to the needs of western laity by focusing less attention on traditional ceremonies, holidays, and rituals. As in all sets of extremes, there is a middle ground, a synthesis of the two extremes into a third group. In reference to American Buddhism, this group is primarily university-educated Asian monks, serving as teachers and leaders, and small groups of American immigrants who are studying and practicing together to blur the edges between the two divergent groups (Seager, 2001, p. 151). This synthesis is apparent in their monastic foundations that they extend beyond themselves to the ethnic communities. These three sometimes overlapping groups synthesize into one prominent Buddhist influence growing in America.

According to Chryssides (1999), this Western Buddhist Order tends to have two major objectives. The first objective is to express an authentic form of Buddhism, one that is accessible and relevant to Westerners and the second is that all major Buddhist traditions provide an equal understanding of Buddhist doctrine and contribution to one's spiritual development (Chryssides, 1999, p. 227). Somehow, through the vast varieties of Buddhism and differences among them, they form a sort of unity. Again, Chryssides illuminates the three types of unity common among the various strands of Buddhism. First, the methodological unity of Buddhist traditions is made clear in its ability to meet the different spiritual needs of different people while simultaneously maintaining the basics of Buddhism (p. 227). The answer to how all traditions (except perhaps Nichiren Buddhism) could possibly contain the basic aspects of Buddhism lies in their historical unity as they all stem from the Buddha himself. In fact, the most insightful observation of the unity of these numerous traditions is viewing each as a successive layer of spiritual development (p. 228). Therefore, it should be concluded from these observations that all forms and practices of Buddhism contain the full measure of "truth" as any other form of Buddhism, such as they complement more so than contradict each other. No form of Buddhism, young or old, should be assumed the greatest and therefore final form.

Numbers

With all the variety and availability of Buddhist resources, it is not surprising that the number of adherents is growing rapidly, which is evident in the number of temples and centers and the growing wide-spread acceptance of Eastern philosophies. Layman (1976) clarifies the four main reasons why it is difficult, yet today, to estimate accurately the number of Buddhists in America: most self-professed Buddhists do not commit to attending ceremonies or membership;

common practice is to think of members as those who have made financial contributions to the church or temple; membership may include people on the mailing lists who are merely interested non-Buddhist scholars; and Buddhists tend to regard religion as a private matter and consequently have no affiliation with any Buddhist church, temple, or society (p. xiv). These difficulties are especially apparent when four estimates from the past decade are compared. Cadge (2005) explains that conservative estimates show that between 500,000 and 1 million people in America are Buddhist, but that a more accurate estimate could be made of 2-3 million (pp. 21 & 5). Another account estimates that between 3 and 4 million people in the United States are Buddhist, though about only 800,000 are converts (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xv). In 1994, Peter Jennings' research estimated that 4-6 million Americans, including Asian Americans and Euro-American ethnic groups, claim to be Buddhist, creating perhaps a more significant religious movement than many Protestant denominations (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 1). Due to the flexibility Buddhism is showing in American culture, and the ease with which Americans are accepting the foreign philosophy, any of these estimates could be accurate. A national survey shows that one in seven Americans claim to have a fair amount of contact with Buddhists and close to 1/3 said that they were very or somewhat familiar with Buddhist teachings (Cadge, 2005, p. 6). There may never be a precise assessment of the number of Buddhists in America, but Layman thinks that the more important issue is the significant trends of the various Buddhist sects in America, not the academic question of statistics (1976, p. xv). One way we can now, and surely in the coming decades, gauge Buddhism's popularity is through its acceptance from the non-Buddhist, general public.

Vipassana Meditation

The second layer of Theravada Buddhism in America is based primarily on the meditation techniques attributed to the Buddha, methods which led to his enlightenment. But with the translation from Pali (the language of Theravada literature) to English and the difficulty of portraying Eastern concepts in Western terms creates a divide in Americans' ability to understand and grasp, much less practice, Theravada meditation. According to Al Rapaport (1998), defining Buddhist meditation is like trying to define jazz, even complicated for Louis Armstrong to describe: meditation must be lived to be learned (p. xiii). The understanding of basic meditation concepts relies on simple descriptions and readily-available clarifications.

Theravada teaches two main forms of meditation. One type is *samatha* meditation, translated as "concentration" or "tranquility" (Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, p. 3). *Samatha* aims at attaining a state of mind where the meditator focuses on only one thing, brings it to rest and does not allow the mind to wander (p. 3). The second type of meditation in the Theravada tradition is *vipassana* which typically translates as "insight," which most scholars of religion agree sticks more closely to the Buddha's original teachings than any of the world's other Buddhist sects (Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, p. 3; Coleman, 2001, p. 6). In this practice, the more popular form in the West, the meditator seeks to gain a clear moment-to-moment awareness in which one is aware of what is happening precisely as it happens. *Vipassana*, therefore, is used as a tool of concentration that can be used to break down the wall of illusion in the world that blocks the "living light of reality" (Henepola Gunaratana, 2002, p. 3). When the wall crumbles, liberation is attained (p. 3). According to Winston Lee King (1980), *vipassana* is "the total, supersaturated, existentializing of the Theravada world view that all existence in personal and individual modes of being, intrinsically and ineradicably embodies impermanence,

pain, and impersonality” (p. 94). These observations provide possible reasons for Buddhism’s spread in and through the West.

Vipassana originated in laity-oriented meditation centers in South and Southeast Asia, following the perceived form of the Buddha’s practice. As early as the 1960’s, lay Americans went to train in Asia and then returned home to teach forms of *vipassana* meditation more or less as a separate entity of Theravada Buddhism without the traditional monastic and lay religious elements (Seager, 1999, p. 146). Among these pioneers were Ruth Denison and her husband, who made numerous trips to and from Asia to learn Buddhist philosophy. Ruth started teaching in 1973, and in 1977 bought desert property in California and built the Dhamma Dena, which has since become the most important retreat center for the movement (Seager, 1999, p. 147). Due to the determination and methodology of these principle leaders, *vipassana* is currently the most secular and Western form of Buddhist meditation with the “lightest cultural baggage from the East” (Coleman, 2001, p. 8). Leaders have since brought *vipassana* over and transformed it into a primarily American form of meditation though it continues to be deeply rooted in Eastern, Buddhist tradition.

The original great influx of liberal thought regarding Theravada Buddhism came from the motives of early teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg. Kornfield and Goldstein first met in 1974 at the Naropa Institute and proceeded to join efforts in shaping how Theravada Buddhism would be taught to Americans in the United States (Cadge, 2005, p. 28). They, along the Salzberg, were more interested in *vipassana* than in Theravada Buddhism as it was practiced in the Asian countries. They sought to simplify the practices they had learned in Asia so that they could offer a “clear, straight forward form of Buddhist practice in the West” by leaving out Eastern culture, rituals, and ceremonies (pp. 28-29). They desired to

take a tradition infused with the imagery and metaphor of Asia, reduce it down to the unchanging essence, that which was prevalent in nearly all the Buddha's teachings, and try to express this essence in the imagery of a new time and place.

What emerged was the incorporation of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) on May 19, 1975, moving the following January to a mansion and farmland in Barre, Massachusetts (Cadge, 2005, p. 29). The center was founded and lead by lay white people, though monastics and lay teachers from Asia visited and led retreats, and offered teacher-led courses and self-retreats, largely in the style of Burmese meditation masters (pp. 32 & 29). Since IMS was going strong, Kornfield left in 1984 to take the elements of the organization to California, creating Insight Meditation West which was more experimental, "drawing on ideas and techniques outside Theravada Buddhism and vipassana meditation such as psychotherapy (p. 35). This was the beginning of Theravada's move to the west coast of the United States.

One of the main reasons *vipassana* has gained such high popularity is the ease with which laity can engage in a practice that has traditionally only been available to celibate monastics in the East. The techniques of *vipassana* are loose and can easily be applied to ordinary life with a similar purpose as other meditation techniques: to be released from the bondage of *samsara* (King, 1980, p. 88-89, 94). This simplicity is met by the opposition of those who, like Joseph Goldstein, believe that house-holding is not a perfect vehicle comparable to monasticism and that *vipassana* alone is not concurrent with the Buddha's teachings. Goldstein questions whether Americans are "mainstreaming the excellence of the Buddha's teachings" and is concerned that Buddhism is probably following the same "declensions" as in American Protestantism. Declension is the Protestant term for the "gradual loosening of the doctrine and practice over successive generations" (Seager, 1999, pp. 150-151). *Vipassana* is seen as the

Buddha's own method of meditation and that which helped to produce the Buddha's enlightenment, as its purpose is to allow the meditator to perceive the nature of reality and accurately understand how everything works. In these terms, it seems that laity in the West will now have a chance to achieve the same enlightenment as monastics of the East, even though the theory is not supported by many scholars of religion or orthodox, Eastern Buddhists (Seager, 1999, p. 150). Despite this debate, Jack Kornfield recognizes that with all the various Buddhist traditions and levels of practicing those traditions in American, something new and distinct is happening and forming on this continent.

U.S. Theravada Organizations

It is important to recognize that, like all the Buddhist sects in America today, even the organizations of Theravada Buddhism are only loosely connected to each other. They all have their own agendas, funding, leaders, and guidelines for running their organization, though they are all in a sense bound to each other through their ties in the East. As of 1999, there was yet to be a single, collaborated front of Buddhism in the West for which Westerners have a clear preference for, and, as the following research alludes, there are still many more issues to overcome before Buddhism is able to make a united stand in the West and specifically in America (Chryssides, 1999, p. 243). Though they all stem from one great tradition, the majority of organizations operate as individual entities in the United States. As various sects of Buddhism meet in the West, a broad-ranging eclecticism has characterized the New Buddhism that is scarcely seen in Asia (Coleman, 2001, p. 16).

For Theravada Buddhism, centers were first founded in the late 1960's, the first being the Buddhist Study Center in New York, founded by both Thai and American Buddhists. Shortly

after, Wat Vajiradhammapadip was founded purely by Thai Buddhists in New York (Cadge, 2005, p. 26). The 1970's saw the foundation of at least three other large-scale temples as well as several organizes committees. In 1971, Wat Thai L.A. was founded and before 1979, both Wat Buddhawararam in Denver and Wat Dhammaram in Chicago were also founded (Cadge, 2005, p. 27). Two main societies were formed, including the incorporated Sri Lankan- American Buddha Dhamma Society in 1975 and the Theravada Buddhist Society of America (one of the early Burmese Buddhist Organizations in the U.S.) was founded between October 1979 and February 1980 (Cadge, 2005, pp. 26 & 30). Theravada Buddhism made its presence known in America in the 1970's and continued to flourish throughout the 1980's and 1990's.

The transition from the East to the West and specifically the United States forced Theravada Buddhist sects to reevaluate many of their traditions including how to build their temples in accordance with American zoning regulations. Though many organizations were able to buy new buildings or build new Thai-style buildings, others were forced to remain in their original buildings. Many of the traditional Thai rules for buildings were amended, such as combining buildings into one, and organizations were forced to move from areas zoned residential to areas zoned for religious gatherings (Cadge, 2005, p. 33). Though many groups were faced with such difficulties of assimilation and immigration, the Buddhist population continued to thrive on into the 1980's and 1990's.

Not only did the Buddhist population rise in the 80's, but groups also became more widespread as immigrants and converts moved inland from the East and West coasts. The Buddhist community in Rhode Island became the center for establishing Buddhist temples in the Cambodian refugee community in the very early 1980's (Cadge, 2005, p. 33). Then, in 1983, the Bhavana Society was established by Sri Lankan monk Bhante Henepola Guaratana and lay white

American meditator Matthew Flieckstein. The monastery for the Bhavana society was then founded and attended by both Asian and white American-born Buddhists (Cadge, 2005, p. 36). Also, in the late 1980's, the Barre Center for Buddhist studies opened in Massachusetts, just one mile down the road from IMS, to try to "find a meaningful bridge between study and practice, between the communities of scholars and meditators, between the ancient orthodox tradition and the modern spirit of critical inquiry" (Cadge, 2005, pp. 42-43). Throughout this building era, though, there has been a lack of interest in preserving the "authentic Eastern Dharma" among second generation immigrants (p. 15). They have begun to be more focused on fitting into America and less on their religious roots, which brings the inevitable question of how Theravada Buddhism will continue in the U.S. beyond the first generation and the implications this disinterest will have on the shape of Buddhism in America.

Globalization

Since the 1980's, significant universal progress has been made to integrate Buddhism into the American society as well as adapting American culture to allow for Buddhist philosophy. As of 1994 there were at least two dozen North American universities that employed at least two full-time faculty that were devoted to the academic discipline of Buddhist Studies and there were approximately 150 academic scholars of Buddhism in North America (Prebish & Tanaka, 1998, p. 9). Also, between 1987 and 1997, the number of Buddhist meditation centers in the United States more than doubled, companies were created to produce meditation cushions and Buddhist art emerged (Cadge, 2005, p. 6). The spread of Buddhism into America and the rest of the Western world is a high indicator of the globalization effect on Buddhism on the past century. Buddhism's ideas, practices, and people have spread into many

non-Asian countries and have attempted to create a new form of Buddhism, a mixture of the traditional aspects and the culture in which it arrives. Now, the new Buddhism is not merely open to an elite group of monks, but it has made the “path of meditation and spiritual awakening available to everyone” (Coleman, 2001, book jacket). Even today, the majority of Buddhist teachers are Asian missionaries who have made their home in the U.S. (Williams & Queen, 1999, p. xv). It is not a surprise that a number of Americans have excelled at understanding Buddhist philosophy and are teaching, but Buddhism again shows its flexibility as traditional leaders from the East lead a more modern form of Buddhism in a new world. As Buddhism continues to spread, British writer Stephen Batchelor recognizes that its significance is most prevalent and apparent in the “arts, in steadily increasing numbers of converts and Buddhist institutions, and in the growing recognition of Buddhist groups as participants and partners in the multi-religious composition of Western societies” (Prebish & Baumann, 2002, p. 3). Buddhism continues to flourish as it gradually finds its “place” in American society.

Americanization Issues

In the midst of founding these organizations, an overall trend could, and can now, be seen in regards to which people attend which services and at which centers. Progress has been made among both immigrants as well as American converts to establish organizations and specific community societies, but research shows that the two groups have progressed, for the most part, separate from each other. There is currently an overall drive in Buddhism to apply Buddhist principles to all issues in contemporary society, a movement termed “socially engaged Buddhism” (Seager, 1999, p. 201). This philosophy is more than showing compassion and doing charitable activities, but it includes applying the dharma to social issues with a focus on the

collective transformation of a society rather than attaining personal enlightenment. In the United States, socially engaged Buddhism draws upon at least three distinct sources for inspiration. First, socially engaged Buddhism is an expression of liberal-left social concerns from the 1960's, a time when meditation was taken up alongside political work, and accentuated in the 1970's when the dharma was seen as a powerful tool for social change (p. 202). Second, the Buddhist social movements in Asia have been influential since the middle of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century. The single most inspirational source in this country has been Thich Nhat Hanh, who began the development of Zen-based social action in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, coining the phrase "socially engaged Buddhism." The third source of inspiration for socially engaged Buddhism in America is the general attitude toward reform which is particularly evident in Protestantism's this-worldly, activist orientation (Seager, 1999, pp. 202-203).

The two main developments of socially engaged Buddhism in America are groups associated with Thich Nhat Hanh and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Both emphasize inspiration over doctrine, are not bound to a single tradition, and promote friendly relations between different religious groups, a direct result and influence of American culture (Seager, 1999, p. 203). Thich Nhat Hanh's approach is more cosmopolitan with a "mystic quality" due to his deep Asian background, therefore tending to be more international in scope than the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (p. 203). Central to Nhat Hanh's philosophy is the Tiep Hien Order or Order of Interbeing, a guidebook for being socially engaged Buddhists, which translates into being in touch with oneself at the present time. The guide, which is grounded in his treatment of the First Noble Truth, that all life is characterized by *dukkha*, was presented to Buddhists in the United States when Nhat Hanh toured the country in 1985 (p. 203). His approach is very simple, giving

Americans something tangible to grasp, more so than Asian culture and heritage. He insists that the world could be changed and peoples could live in harmony if people would stop judging; rather, they ought to smile and individually maintain personal peace. Nhat Hanh also refocused the precepts that are essential to the extended community so that they are positive and emphasize the good that can be done instead of actions that should be avoided (p. 204). His plan for engaged Buddhism requires personal and social responsibility in which the interests of others are critically evaluated and treated with equality.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) integrates Buddhist meditation and social activism into a dual commitment to a peace movement and the *sangha*. The BPF was founded in 1978 by a small group of Buddhists including Robert Aitken, Gary Snyder, and Joanna Macy, who envisioned the West's social revolution to be best revitalized by the East's emphasis on morality, meditation, and personal wisdom (Seager, 1999, p. 206). Though the BPF's main focus is in the United States, in recent years it has made contacts with engaged Buddhists in Asia by launching social action campaigns in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Eventually, BPF leaders visiting the East met Thich Nhat Hanh and were able to exchange philosophical ideas, leading to more developed ideas about socially engaged Buddhism (p. 207). BPF leaders were then able to bring these more refined ideas and philosophies back to the United States with motivation and strategies to better promote peace and reconciliation across geographical and religious boundaries. The group now works in the U.S. primarily on issues of nonviolence and weapons control including nuclear arms, land mines, and handguns (p. 207). One of the most prominent BPF groups is the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), which is designed for lay persons committed to socially relevant work in the context of Buddhist training, practice, and reflection. As with all other BPF groups, BASE is a path for Buddhist practice, not simply a

mode of Buddhist service, and an outlet through which to foster awareness of how the *dharma* can be realized in personal and social dimensions of everyday life (p. 208). BFP and BASE, along with many other Buddhist organizations, are laying a solid foundation for the future of Buddhism in America.

Though these groups are having a great impact on the American religious landscape, there are other issues that continue to limit Buddhism from spreading faster and further than its current status. There has been much debate in the U.S. in the religious community regarding how Buddhism fits into the community. Many converts, as noted before, tend to pick and choose the aspects of Buddhism that are most appealing and incorporate those aspects into their religious philosophy. Problems arise when people positioned firmly in one tradition add aspects of Buddhism to their orthodox tradition, specifically Christianity and Judaism (Seager, 1999, p. 217). As seen in David Chappell's story, perhaps it is easier to deny validity to the aspects of both traditions that are in conflict, compromising one seemingly absolute for another, rather than adding the two together.

This presence of many forms of Buddhism in America has made a great impact on the dynamics of inter-religious dialogue, specifically adding a completely new component to discussions with Christians and Jews. These discussions are many decades old, but they now include new topics and issues as a result of the transmission to the West. For many, it is odd that a Zen Buddhist teacher would put a statue of Jesus on an altar beside a statue of the Buddha, and then light incense to both images. It may seem even more irrational to suggest that a Catholic priest would sit in meditation, following the breath instructions from a Zen teacher. America seems to have a set of unspoken religious norms that are, with the quick introduction of Buddhism, being flipped upside-down, since now practically anything that is possible is also

permissible. A review of Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1996) in *Christian Century* is the one important impetus to the current dialogue (Seager, 1999, p. 221). Indeed, for many previous decades, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue focused primarily on doctrinal and philosophical issues, such as the technical differences between prayer and meditation, whereas they now place an even greater emphasis on how the two can be integrated and become one.

Few Christians have worked harder to address issues beyond the dialogue process than Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk and priest who additionally and alternatively played a key role in introducing Buddhism to American Christians. Born in France in 1915, Merton was raised in a religiously mixed household, then converted to Catholicism while studying in America, and later joined the Trappist monastic community in Kentucky (Seager, 1999, p. 222). He gained religious insight over the next twenty years and became established as one of the most influential American writers on spiritual issues (p. 222). He developed a particular interest in Asian religions in the 50's and was especially drawn to studying the similarities between Zen and Christian mysticism. In 1968, Merton took permission to go to a Bangkok meeting for Benedictines who were heading Catholic monasteries in Asia, but his primary focus was to meet Buddhist leaders, including the Dalai Lama, in order to learn more about the diverse religious practice. He ended up exhorting Asian monastics to maintain their traditions especially guarding them as they inevitably become more engaged with the Western world and its complexities (p. 223). His passion inspired many people to look at the relations between "contemplation and social action and the significance of Christ and the Buddha in a cross-traditional frame of reference" (p. 224). At the centennial of the first World's Parliament of Religions, Buddhists and Christians came together to discuss these issues and more, calling themselves the

“forerunners of a spiritual unity that is prophetic of all mankind” (p. 224). Thoughts, theories, and many suggestions have continued to develop and spread since the conference, clarifying notions from some people while thoroughly confusing others by offering too many options. Robert E. Kennedy explains his balance of philosophies as follows: “I never have thoughts of myself as anything but Catholic and I certainly have never thought of myself as a Buddhist... What I looked for in Zen was not a new faith, but a new way of being Catholic that grew out of my own lived experience” (p. 224). Evident here and across the nation is this ever-increasing sense of individual combinations and purposes for including and excluding aspects of certain traditions into one’s own religious experience.

The Buddhist-Jewish dialogue has taken on its own unique characteristics because of the key role that Jewish Buddhists have played in the introduction of Buddhism to America. Dialogue between Buddhists and Jews in America goes back to the World’s Parliament in 1893, being influenced by prominent figures as Allen Ginsberg during the Beat generation, Rodger Kamenetz’s *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet’s Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist Identity*, the co-founders of IMS, and the Dalai Lama. Regarding the challenges Judaism faces by modernity, the Dalai Lama stated, “if we try to isolate ourselves from modernity, this is self-destruction...[we] have to face reality” (Seager, 1999, p. 228). Two of the most influential and remarkable inter-religious meetings for Buddhism and Judaism were the Dharamsala in 1990 and Seders for Tibet in 1997 (p. 229). These relations are most important especially since, as in the American Buddhism section, Jews are among the groups that most readily accept Buddhist philosophy.

A final key player on the Jewish-Buddhist scene is Sylvia Boorstein, a practicing psychotherapist, a student of Joseph Goldstein, a Buddhist representative in major Buddhist-

Christian dialogue, and a self-proclaimed dedicated Jew. In her recent book, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*, Boorstein recounts her success in reconciling a dual religious identity by explaining how her twenty years of meditation practices enriched her Judaism and has helped her to enjoy and love life more (Seager, 1999, pp. 229-230). Though she was raised Jewish and viewed Judaism as a fundamental part of her personal identity, at her first Buddhist retreat she recalls being captivated by the Buddha's teaching which inspired her to live a life cultivating compassion and contentment (p. 230). She is now devoted to discovering and pointing out the parallels between Buddhist and Christian traditions to help others see the great potential in combining these dynamic traditions.

Further exemplifying this particular type of dialogue, Boorstein uses her personal conclusions and decisions in her book to edify others on a similar religious course. When asked why she would want to complicate her life with Judaism since she was still dedicated to Buddhist practice, Boorstein replies that, "it's not a question, for [her], of *deciding* to complicate [herself] with Judaism. [She *is*] complicated with Judaism. [She has] too much background in it not to be" (Boorstein, 1997, p. 41). So, for Boorstein, it is not that she must decide what to be, but that she 'is' the very things that capture and define her.

As seen here, inter-religious dialogue is very complex and diverse with vast theological and philosophical implications. Over the past couple of decades this dialogue has deepened even more with the help of the flexibility Buddhism has shown in assimilating into American culture. Scholars think that the American landscape is possibly one of these 'perfect settings' with unprecedented opportunities to view the creative interactions between religious traditions

(Seager, 1999, p. 231). Tracking the interactions among religions in America, however, is even more difficult with the ever-evolving culture in America.

Despite some conflicts present with inter-religious dialogue, there is minimal pressure on Buddhism to be united, thus far, in America. For now there are too many versions, forms, and opinions on how Buddhism “fits” in America to form a single “America Buddhism.” The most striking example of this noncommittal manner of Western Buddhism is seen in the characteristics of the covert communities versus the immigrant communities. While immigrants tend to remain informed by Asian worldviews, converts are integrating the *dharma* with a more secular view on life (Seager, 1999, p. 234). To emphasize the secularizing character of Buddhism in the West, British Buddhist advocate Stephen Batchelor argues that the dharma is becoming and ought to be an “existential, therapeutic, and liberating agnosticism,” a truly different kind of “Buddhism without beliefs” as compared to that which is found within immigrant communities (p. 234). Certainly, the use of the dharma is very different in convert groups from immigrant groups, creating two varied forms of “Western Buddhism.” Seager (1999) claims that the definition of American Buddhism yet-to-come will be determined by the forms that stand over time, the ones that endure the purifying process projected for the early decades of the twenty-first century (p. 236). This is the time when foundations for the future American Buddhism are being formulated and laid.

Another large issue that has been integral in refining and defining Buddhism in the West is the transformation of traditional gender roles from conservative Asian ones to modern American ones. The issue of gender roles has been discussed extensively in regard to the transmission of the *dharma* to America, which is proof of the persuasive influences on Buddhism’s new form. Scholars and religious persons cannot deny the significant and diverse

roles women such as Helena Blavatsky, Mrs. Alexander Russell, Ruth Fuller, Ruth Denison, Jiyu Kennett and others have held as the *dharma* has been transmitted West (Seager, 1999, p. 185). It was practically inevitable that women would have a more important role in Buddhism in the West than the East, especially when taking into consideration the increasingly feminist and women's rights approach in the West. In fact, "virtually all commentators within the Buddhist community now note that one hallmark of American Buddhism is the way in which the dharma is being transformed in terms of gender equity" (p. 186). As one might imagine, with any revolutionary notions, gender equity has been met with much opposition and furthermore been subject to consequential scandals.

Future Outlook

To date, Theravada and other forms of Buddhism have already faced and overcome many issues of assimilation and transmission in the West, but there are still many issues to overcome before a united Buddhism of the West or 'American Buddhism' is formed. According to Cadge (2005), these issues include the concern that practitioners' children may not become Buddhist practitioners themselves, the struggle to determine how to pass the responsibilities along in monastic and lay centers as their leaders age, the challenge in maintaining physical structures and securing resources, and how to preserve the essence of the Buddha's teachings in the West and the United States (pp. 199-201). It is also relevant to wonder how Theravada Buddhism will take shape in future generations, especially considering modern advances in technology, world-views, and globalism. Therefore, "if the Western Buddhist Order is to be truly western and to make an impact on western minds, it must pay due regard to the findings of modern science" (Chryssides, 1999, p. 228). Indeed, much progress must be made if a united Buddhism is the

goal, yet it is possible and attainable, considering the rapid entry and growth of Buddhism's popularity in the West.

Conclusions / Reflection

In just over three decades, Theravada Buddhist traditions have come to the United States from Southeast Asia via multiple venues. Immigrants came West in search of work and 'freedom,' Peace Corps volunteers returned with philosophies learned while abroad, and Buddhist monks and missionaries have carried their message out from the East. However, upon arriving in the U.S., Theravada Buddhists have had to make numerous adaptations to their practice. The many forms of Buddhism now in America reflect its inherent flexibility in adapting to modernity and reaching Westerners with a streamlined form of Buddhism, which omits many of the complicated traditions from the East. The remaining challenge is to synthesize these various forms of Buddhism present in America into a single, united 'American Buddhism.' Factors to consider as Buddhism takes a more distinct shape in America include "the societal conditions of exit and reception, the particularities of the religious tradition, the ways in which the tradition arrives in the United States, the resources practitioners have, the practitioners' goals, and the practitioners' ties with their home countries" (Cadge, 2005, p. 198). The future is bright and the possibilities are practically endless for the formation of Buddhism in the West. The stage is set and the resulting production will inevitably be remarkable to monitor and a marvel to witness.

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